

AUDIO

FAQ

Q I've heard that Windows Vista supports only basic audio in games. Is this true, and should I avoid upgrading?

A Windows Vista does away with the hardware audio abstraction layer, which means that hardware acceleration for audio effects is no longer available to games written for the DirectX sound library, DirectSound3D (DS3D). This is bad news in the short term, but Microsoft's new Universal Audio Architecture (UAA) promises various benefits, including fewer glitches and crashes, per-application volume controls and – in the long run – greater flexibility for games designers by doing away with the inherent limitations of hardware acceleration.

If you have a Creative X-Fi sound card, you can download a utility called ALchemy. This converts DS3D instructions to OpenAL, which works in Vista. See *Upgrade Workshop* on page 162 for details. If you don't have an X-Fi card, you may need to stick with Windows XP for the time being. Check your manufacturer's website for new drivers or a workaround, or visit the forums to discover when one is expected.

Ben Pitt

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ISYMPHONY M2

★★★★★

£150 inc VAT



Speakers with an integrated dock provide a convenient way of listening to your iPod at home.

However, systems that are designed for such a specific single task risk becoming obsolete if you upgrade your MP3 player. As such, we were rather taken by the iSymphony M2. Its iPod dock runs the same risk of obsolescence as any other, but it's backed up by a conventional CD player and FM radio, plus a USB port and SD card slot. Together, these allow MP3, WMA and WAV file playback from SD cards, USB storage devices and MP3 players with an integrated USB plug. The CD drive can play MP3 CDs, and even DVD-Videos through a comprehensive set of video outputs.

The front panel is covered with an excess of blue lights that makes the system look dated. It's quite deep at 33cm, which is probably too much for most shelves. The button layout could be better, and skipping multiple tracks is quite slow and awkward. This is particularly unfortunate because the M2 can't read music files stored in folders on USB devices, SD cards or MP3 CDs. You'll need to store all your music in the root, and wade through a long list of tracks to make selections. iPod playback is fine, though, as you select tracks on the player.

Given the M2's reasonable price and wealth of features, we were surprised to find that it also has decent sound quality. There's plenty of bass and reasonable clarity, and the lack of high treble



detail doesn't detract much from the overall listening experience. The ability to position the two speakers in different locations gives a much more spacious stereo image than you get from all-in-one speaker systems such as Altec Lansing's M602 (opposite). The maximum volume before distortion sets in isn't huge, but for a kitchen, bedroom or small living room it should be plenty.

We would love the M2 even more – and happily pay another £50 – if it incorporated a DAB radio or internet radio features similar to those of Terratec's

Noxon iRadio (opposite).

However, as hi-fi systems go, we haven't seen anything else this versatile. The combined CD player and iPod dock perform well, and the more unusual features such as the USB port, SD slot and DVD playback are bound to come in handy occasionally. The M2's surprisingly good sound quality and reasonable price mean we're happy to live with its minor flaws.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of computer-friendly music sources
- ✓ Robust sound quality
- ✗ Controls are a little clumsy

HI-FI SYSTEM CD/DVD player and FM radio with iPod dock, USB port and SD card reader, line input, line, headphone and subwoofer audio outputs, composite, S-video and component video outputs, iPod sync cable pass-through, 50W RMS power
PART CODE 359122
SUPPLIER www.comet.co.uk
DETAILS www.mysymphony.com

Also consider...

PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£85 inc VAT



Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC via a wireless network and plays it on your hi-fi. It comes with Philips' own server program, but you can also use it with Windows Media Connect.

The SLA5520 is quite a basic device, but it's a great buy if you want an easy way to play your music wirelessly.



WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER Supports MP3, Wav, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11g interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3.5mm socket audio output. Requires Windows 2000/XP
SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>
DETAILS www.philips.com
✓ Good value ✗ Screen hard to read
FULL REVIEW Jul 2006

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£28 inc VAT



Logitech's X-230 were the most affordable 2.1 channel speakers in our recent Labs test, but they sounded better than much more expensive competitors. Each satellite's drivers are visible through a cloth net covering, while the compact subwoofer is protected by a sturdy metal grille.

These speakers could do with a second audio input, longer cables and an easy to reach bass level control, but they're outstanding for this price. Though not amazingly loud, they look superb and produce detailed and balanced sound.



2.1 SPEAKERS Line input, 32W RMS power
PART CODE 970123-0120 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk
✓ Excellent sound ✗ Only one input
FULL REVIEW Apr 2006

LOGITECH Z-5450

★★★★★

£199 inc VAT



Logitech's Z-5450 5.1 surround-sound speakers transmit sounds to the rear set wirelessly, so you'll have less clutter in your living room. Sound quality is excellent and the speakers are loud.

With loads of inputs and a decoder, these speakers are perfect for your PC or DVD player.



5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs, one coaxial and two optical digital inputs, 315W RMS power PART CODE 970191-0120 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Sound great; loads of features ✗ Expensive
FULL REVIEW Dec 2006

TERRATEC Noxon iRadio

★★★★★

£128 inc VAT



This network music player tunes to over 2,500 internet radio stations and podcasts through your broadband router, and streams music files from your PC. Joining a WPA-encrypted network is straightforward, but password-entry requires the remote. You can browse stations easily by genre or location, bar the occasional long pause.

The single 3in speaker sounded better than we expected, but it was still basic. Internet radio's sound quality often isn't that high, but streaming our own MP3s revealed the speaker's limitations.

As we listened to internet stations playing 1920s big band, Japanese hip hop and Uzbekistani pop, we soon forgot we couldn't access the listed BBC stations. For the same price, Philips' SLA5520 and Logitech's X-230 speakers (see 'Also consider...' below) give superior sound, but the iRadio is neater and has better internet radio support.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ☒ Access to lots of radio stations
- ☒ Compact, self-contained design
- ☒ Basic sound quality

NETWORK MEDIA PLAYER Supports MP3 streams, local MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM files, wired Ethernet and wireless 802.11g interfaces, WEP and WPA encryption, line, speakers and headphone outputs, 5W RMS power
PART CODE E3351
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS uk.terratec.net

ALTEC LANSING M602

★★★★★

£127 inc VAT



These mains-powered iPod speakers sound better than most systems we've tried. Music is full-bodied and detailed, with plenty of volume and surprisingly solid bass for such a compact unit. Its dock accepts third-generation and later iPods, including the Nano and Mini. It also has a clip-on podium and a line input for use with any MP3 player, although sound quality wasn't as good in this mode. The package includes a bracket for wall mounting.

We tested the speakers with a fifth-generation iPod. The player rests against the metal speaker grille when seated in the dock, and this caused the player and grille to rattle against each other at certain bass frequencies. This problem occurred rarely, and we fixed it by slipping a piece of cardboard between the player and the speakers, but this is hardly an elegant solution.

Sound quality is marginally better than that of the Logitech AudioStation (see 'Also consider...' below), but the Logitech's FM radio and lack of design flaws mean it's a better buy.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ☒ Excellent sound quality
- ☒ Odd rattle at certain frequencies
- ☒ Few features

IPOD SPEAKERS Line input, iPod dock connector, headphone and composite video out, USB iPod pass-through
PART CODE E3501
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.alteclansing.co.uk

CHOOSING A... Speaker System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

SURROUND FORMAT: Stereo

RMS POWER: 5W

INPUTS: 1x analogue

BUILT-IN DECODING: None

Recommended minimum in grey

1 PC speaker systems, which consist of speakers and an amplifier to power them, can cost anything from £5 to £300. The cheapest sets, with the specifications shown in grey above, will be fine for those who simply want to play Windows alert noises on a PC they use solely for work.

2 Those who use their PC for any kind of entertainment should go for a better system. The first thing to look for is a subwoofer, which handles bass frequencies, while the satellites output mid- and high-frequency sounds.

Other than this, the best way to establish the quality of a system is to consult our reviews. Specifications don't tell you much and the price of a system often bears little relation to its actual performance.

3 Games and DVDs will benefit greatly from a surround-sound system. The standard surround configuration is 5.1, which consists of five satellite speakers and one subwoofer, but those who must have the latest technologies should consider 6.1 or 7.1 speakers, plus a compatible sound card that is capable of supporting the extended Dolby Digital EX format.

4 The power rating can give you a rough idea of how loud the speakers will go. Ignore PMPO or Peak Power ratings, which can be as much as 40 times the RMS figure.

A 50W RMS system should provide ample volume for a desktop PC, but for a home cinema look for 100W RMS or more.

5 Stereo speakers just need a single analogue stereo input, while a 5.1 system needs three. Surround-sound systems incorporating Dolby Digital decoders must be fed through an S/PDIF digital input, which comes in (non-compatible) coaxial and optical versions. However, as Dolby Digital decoding can be handled in software, surround speakers with analogue inputs are far more cost-effective.

LOGITECH AudioStation

★★★★★

£130 inc VAT



Logitech's AudioStation is a mid-range iPod speaker dock, but it sounds better than many that cost more. It's the only dock we've tested with an FM tuner, a sensible addition given no iPod has its own. You can't synchronise a docked iPod with your PC, but the AudioStation is great value, and the first iPod dock to deserve our Best Buy award.



IPOD DOCK STEREO SPEAKERS iPod dock connector and 3.5mm stereo line input, composite/S-video outputs, FM radio, 80W RMS power **PART CODE** 97 0217-0120 **SUPPLIER** www.morecomputers.co.uk **DETAILS** www.logitech.co.uk ☒ Clear, loud sound ☒ No iPod PC connector **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007

SANDISK Sansa e270

★★★★★

£110 inc VAT



Sandisk's Sansa e270 has 6GB of storage, but it costs about the same as Apple's 4GB iPod Nano. Unlike the Nano, it can play back video files on its colour screen; its software makes it easy to convert and transfer them. It isn't as easy to use as an iPod, but its good battery and sound make it a great choice.

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 6GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM music, JPEG/bitmap picture files and proprietary video files, USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** SDMX4-6144 **SUPPLIER** www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.sandisk.co.uk ☒ Lots of space; good sound ☒ Nano has better controls **FULL REVIEW** Feb 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%

APPLE iPod Shuffle

★★★★★

£52 inc VAT



Apple's tiny iPod Shuffle is affordable and beautifully designed. It's light, with an integrated metal clip that grips clothing securely. The controls are basic: there is just track skip. Battery life and sound are both good, though, so it's a great player if you can live without a screen and don't mind using iTunes.

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, supports MP3, AAC, protected AAC, Wav, AIFF, audible and Apple lossless music, USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** MA564ZT/A **SUPPLIER** www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.apple.com/uk ☒ Tiny; great design ☒ No display **FULL REVIEW** Feb 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%